

HOW TO... Distress artwork

Digital artwork can often look a bit sterile, but with Adam Banks's help you can use an image editor to give your creations a more natural, 'lived-in' appearance

Desktop publishing software – and even Microsoft Word – makes it easy to create covers for books or reports, DVD inlays and graphics for use online, but this kind of digital artwork can look rather sterile. Creating it in an image editor instead allows you to add visual richness. One way to make graphics more appealing is to add an element of distressing to give them a more used, 'lived-in' feel.

Two key techniques for this are darkening and adding noise. Here we'll show them both in action. We've used Photoshop Elements 5, but most mid-range image editors have similar tools.

1 Run Photoshop Elements and opt to Edit and Enhance Photos. You could use some existing artwork, but we'll start from scratch by selecting File, New, Blank File (or Ctrl-N). In the dialog box, choose a preset size or create your own – we've used 1,024x768 – and make sure Color Mode is set to RGB Color. Click OK.

Now add your text with the Text tool. Make it black for now, but choose a suitable font and formatting. We've picked the unpromising-looking Stencil font. It looks basic, to say the least, but some distressing will soon change that.

2 It's time to get rid of that blank white background. In the Layers palette on the right (select it from the Window menu if it isn't visible), click the Background layer beneath your text and choose Fill Layer from the Edit menu. In the dialog box, you can pick either a plain colour or a pattern from the Use: menu. We've chosen Pattern. Click the Custom Pattern switch to show a picker, and click the triangle at the top-

right of this to choose from a list of pattern sets, then pick a pattern. We've used Wood from the set called Patterns. Set Blending Mode to Normal and Opacity to 100 per cent, then click OK.

3 This adds interest, but we need more texture and variation. Choose the Rectangular Marquee tool from the main toolbox on the left, or press M. In the Options bar at the top, set Feather to about five per cent of the width of your canvas, in this case 50 pixels (px). Now click and drag to draw a rectangle on your canvas, leaving an even margin all round. The corners look rounded because of the feathering.

4 We need the area outside the rectangle, so press Shift-Ctrl-I to invert the selection. Now go to Enhance, Adjust Lighting, Levels, or press Ctrl-L. On the Input Levels histogram in the middle of the dialog box, click the black marker at the bottom left and drag it to the right. This darkens the area but maintains its colour saturation, giving the impression of surface variation, in this case an aged wood effect.

An alternative would be to drag the white slider on the lower Output Levels scale to the left. This would darken the selection by adding black, giving the impression that the surface was evenly coloured but that the selected area was in shadow. Remember these two different ways of darkening so that you can use the appropriate one for the effect you want.

5 To enrich the texture further, add 'noise' (random variation). Go to Filter, Noise, Add Noise. Only the selected area will be

affected, so click within this to make sure the preview in the dialog box reflects your changes. Set the type of noise to Gaussian and Monochromatic, then adjust the Amount. We've used 10 per cent for clarity, but two to five per cent is usually enough.

Enhance your effects by reapplying them to a reduced area. Go to Select, Modify, Contract. In the dialog box, enter a number of pixels that's about 75 per cent of the width of your selected margin, or try the same number you used in step 3 (50 pixels). Press Ctrl-Alt-L to bring up the Levels dialog box with the settings you used previously. Adjust if necessary – for example, drag the white Output Levels slider to add shadow as well as discoloration. Click OK, then press Ctrl-F to repeat the Noise filter.

6 Finally, make your text blend in. First select the marquee selection tool, right-click the image and select Deslect. In the Layers palette, click the top layer containing the text. Using the drop-down menu above, change its blending mode from Normal to Color Burn. (You can also experiment with other modes.) Make any final corrections to your text – we used Ctrl-T to rotate it – then go to Layer, Simplify Layer. You can no longer edit the text, but you can now adjust its colour. Go to Enhance, Adjust Color, Adjust Hue/Saturation, or press Ctrl-U. Tick Colorize, then increase Lightness to at least +25 so that the text is coloured rather than black. Now alter Hue and Saturation as you see fit.

You could now add noise to your text, create a feathered marquee around part of it, adjust the Levels, and so on. **CS**

